

Growing Currants and Gooseberries in Montana

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Currants and gooseberries are hardy fruits that belong to the genus *Ribes*. They can be grown almost anywhere in Montana. Both have been known for centuries and many of today's popular cultivars were developed long ago.

Ribes are interesting deciduous shrubs that attract birds. The fruit makes wonderful preserves, jellies and pies. Three or four plants often produce enough fruit for the average family, and a properly cared-for planting should continue to produce for 10 years or more.

Currants and gooseberries are cold-hardy and grow best where summers are cool and moist. They'll grow almost anywhere but are best adapted to rich, well-drained, clay loam soils. Don't plant them on light, sandy soils that become hot and dry during the summer or on heavy, poorly-drained clay soils. The plants bloom earlier than most fruit so plant on a north-facing slope where flowering is delayed until later in the spring.

Gooseberries have an arching

habit, growing up to five feet tall when mature. The stems are thorny and berries are borne singly along the shoots. Fruit are usually picked at the firm green stage, when they are too tart to eat fresh, and made into pies or preserves. Let them ripen on the bush and they may remain green or turn pink or purple when ripe.

Currants form more upright plants than gooseberries and are thornless. Unlike gooseberries, currants send up shoots away from the main crown and will easily spread. Cultivate them to keep the suckers in check. Currant fruits are less flavorful than gooseberries, and are borne in clusters on the canes. When ripe, currants may be black, red or white (yellow) and are stripped off the cluster rather than being harvested singly.

Gooseberries and currants develop larger fruit with good pollination. Most cultivars are self-fertile but cross-pollination will

produce higher yields and larger fruit. Therefore, plant more than one cultivar.

Planting

Prepare your soil by turning under compost or rotted manure in the autumn prior to either fall or spring planting. Plant dormant one-year-old *Ribes* bushes in autumn, spacing them about five feet apart in rows seven to nine feet apart. Set the plants about an inch deeper than they were in the nursery to promote suckering and a dense bush. Be sure you have quackgrass or other perennial weeds under control before you plant.

Firm the soil around the plant roots and flood the planting site with water. After planting, prune the plants back to four or five canes and cut these back by two-thirds of their original length.

Culture

*Based on previous materials written by O. S. McCarver, Ronald H. Lockerman, Nancy W. Callan and George Evans.

Control weeds by hoeing or shallow cultivation. Organic mulch about six inches thick is also useful in controlling weeds and conserving soil moisture. Take care to keep the mulch away from the base of the canes by about two inches to reduce rodent damage in winter.

Fertilize the plants each spring with about eight ounces of 10-10-10 or equivalent per plant, spreading it into a 12-inch circular area around each plant. Keep it several inches away from the plant base and work it into the soil after application. If you've used fresh organic mulch you may have to add a small handful of additional fertilizer to compensate for the nitrogen used during breakdown of the mulch.

Ribes fruit are borne laterally at the base of one-year-old wood or on short one-year branches on two- and three-year wood. Wood older than three years produces inferior fruit and should be removed. Pruning is a renewal process in which canes older than three years are removed at the base of the plant. Leave three one-year-old stems, three two-year-old stems and three three-year-old stems per plant. Remove the rest, as well as dead or diseased wood and branches arising too close to the ground. Head back the one-year branches to promote fruit bud formation. A well-pruned, vigorous plant should have about nine canes. Always prune in the spring before growth starts.

Pests

Control pests by clean cultivation, proper pruning spraying if necessary.

The white pine blister rust fungus can spend part of its life cycle on both gooseberries and currants. The black currant (*Ribes nigrum*) is highly susceptible to the disease.

A law was passed in 1926 prohibiting the possession, propagation, and sale of black currants and forbidding the shipment of plants into Montana. Federal laws also restrict the introduction of *Ribes* species from other countries. Check with the USDA Plant Protection and Quarantine Division or with the Montana Department of Agriculture before importing these species.

Leaf spot diseases may be common. The spots are small and circular with gray centers. Leaves later turn yellow and drop. These diseases can cause premature defoliation of the bushes in summer. Pruning and removal of infected leaves is usually adequate to control these diseases.

Powdery mildew may infect the leaves with a white moldy growth that results in abnormal leaves and stem tips. A contact fungicide will control this.

Currant caterpillars may feed on the leaves and defoliate the plant. Control this insect by hand picking.

Currant aphids suck the juice from the undersurface of leaves and cause reddish discoloration and crinkling of leaves. Wash the aphids from the leaves with a strong stream of water or use an insecticide recommended to control this pest. **Always read the label and follow it carefully when using any pesticide!**

Harvesting

Strip gooseberries from the branches with a glove-covered hand and process them immediately. Harvest them singly and more carefully to avoid puncturing the fruit on the thorns if they are to be stored for any length of time. Harvest gooseberries for jelly when they are slightly immature.

Gooseberries sunburn easily, so store harvested fruit in the shade until you can get them into the cooler.

Pick currants singly or pick the entire cluster and strip them off just before you use them.

Propagation

Propagate currants and gooseberries by hardwood cuttings or by layering. Currants are usually propagated by cuttings taken during the dormant season. Use healthy one-year wood and make cuttings about eight inches long. Some gooseberry cultivars will also propagate from hardwood cuttings, but layering is usually more successful. To layer, bend the branches to the ground in the fall or spring and hold them in place with pegs. Cover the tips with soil. After one or two seasons the layers will have rooted and can be removed from the parent plant.

Mound layering is also useful for propagating larger numbers of plants. To do this, cut the parent plant back to near the ground during the dormant season. In mid-summer, mound soil around the base of the plant so that the new shoots are covered for half their length. Roots will be produced on the portion of the shoot covered with soil. Remove shoots after they are well rooted.

Cultivars

Many currant and gooseberry cultivars have been in cultivation for years. Newer cultivars have been developed that have improved berry size, disease resistance, and in the case of gooseberries, fewer spines.

Currants

Perfection is an old cultivar with upright growth. Berries are

red, medium-sized and borne in loose clusters.

Red Lake, the leading currant cultivar in North America, originated at the University of Minnesota. Clusters are above medium size, compact and have very large, red berries with a pleasant mild flavor and good quality.

Bushes are nearly erect, and very productive. This cultivar has produced well in experimental plots at the Montana Agricultural Experiment Station, Bozeman.

Wilder, an older cultivar, produces large, dark-red, tart fruit. Plants are vigorous, spreading, productive and moderately resistant to leaf spot.

Stephens No. 9 has large, medium-red fruit borne in large clusters. The plants are spreading and productive.

White Grape is another old cultivar which is still widely grown. Fruits are green-white.

White Imperial is a newer cultivar similar to White Grape.

Minnesota 71 is a large, red-fruited cultivar of good quality, with large clusters. Plants are vigorous, spreading and productive.

Gooseberries

Pixwell berries are medium size

and light red when ripe. Long stems make picking easy. Bushes are moderately vigorous and very productive at Bozeman.

Poorman is a red-fruited gooseberry cultivar that has spiny, spreading growth. Fruit are large and plants are vigorous and productive.

Welcome berries are medium large and ripen very early. The flavor is mildly tart and the color light but dull red. Bushes are vigorous and medium upright. Spines are sparse, very short, weakly attached, and usually missing from older wood. This cultivar yielded well in trials at Bozeman.

Fredonia produces large, dark red fruit on moderately vigorous, open-growing plants.

Red Jacket is nearly thornless, with large, dull red berries.

Other cultivars with reduced thorniness include Abundance, Spinefree and Captivator.

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File under: Horticulture

B-3 (Fruits)

Reprinted September 2000 (5132000900 MS)